
LIFE TEEN PARENT LETTER

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LIFE NIGHT: GOD OR UNICORN

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Have you ever looked back on your life as a teen and questioned some of the choices you made? These choices could simply be how you dressed, what music you listened to, or what hairstyles you had, especially for those of us who grew up in the 80s. Let's just say there were a lot of "questionable" choices (e.g., parachute pants, shoulder pads, an over-abundance of aqua-net hairspray, too many Cyndi Lauper songs, mullets, and just one too many fanny packs). At the time, none of these things were deemed questionable but were accepted as part of our culture and society. As the years went on, however, trends changed, people grew, and different things became the new "in." Looking back may lead us to ask the questions: "Why did I dress like that?" or "How could I have looked like that in public?"

"Why?" and "How?" are two important questions that we need to ask to obtain information and clarification. It's often through these two simple questions that we not only seek answers but also open ourselves to the truth. Much of our personal development is a result of the questions we ask. Our faith is certainly not exempt from this process. Questioning is a very healthy part of our faith journey and one of the ways that we grow. Throughout history, God does not change, but we can obtain a better understanding about who He is and how we relate to Him. Even in Sacred Scripture, it seems like the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament. God did not change. The understanding of who God is changed because people were asking questions and were open to His revelation.

We develop our faith in a variety of ways. Throughout our lives, we are presented with opportunities in which we experience God's presence. We learn about God through our schools and/or churches. We read Sacred Scripture and learn about the traditions of our Church. We experience God through the many wonderful occurrences in our natural world; we look at a beautiful sunset, stand in awe on the shore of an ocean, or gaze upon the grandeur of a mountain. We are even touched by God through personal encounters with Him, as He constantly makes Himself present to us through the experiences in our everyday life.

Over the course of this series, we are exploring popular questions and objections to our faith. The main intent of these questions is to gain a better understanding of God and the Catholic faith. Questioning is good, healthy, and necessary so long as we strive to grow in faith and our knowledge of Church teaching. May the Holy Spirit continue to allow us to know God more each day so that we can continually trust in His goodness (1 Corinthians 12:3). Just think, if we were never to question the things that we do in life, we would still be wearing our Camillagate pants with a tie-dyed shirt. Thank God we have the ability to ask "Why?" and "How?"!

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. What is one experience of God that you have had in your life? Share that experience with your family.
2. Do you think it is important to question different areas of our faith? Why or why not?
3. Are there any Church teachings or beliefs that you currently struggle with? What would be a good resource to use to find the answers?

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LIFE NIGHT: RELIGION OR FREEDOM

CONTENT OVERVIEW

All live theatre productions have one main thing in common: they all have some type of script for the performers to follow. In preparation for the performance, actors and actresses spend a countless number of hours learning, memorizing, and rehearsing their lines. Most scripts not only tell actors and actresses what their lines are but have directions in them as where to stand, when to come on and off stage, when to move, how to and when to express specific emotions, and even certain actions to take throughout the scene.

Our lives are quite different from a play or a musical that we watch performed on stage. We don't have a script to follow that tells us what to say, when to say it, and what actions to take. Nor do we have a director telling us where to go and what to say during our interactions over the course of a day. However, in a certain sense, we do have a script to follow. Perhaps the script that we follow in life is based on and rooted in our Catholic faith.

Many people have made the argument that they are "spiritual" but not religious. This misguided argument addresses someone's need for Christ or some "higher being." However, it views the Church as a limiting entity that removes freedom from our lives, as opposed to offering us even greater freedom. It's an argument that can be no further from the truth. Jesus came to establish the Church (read Matthew 16:18-19) and placed Peter as the head, our first pope. Jesus knew that we would need some guidance in life. Jesus knew that we would have questions and hoped we would search diligently for the answers. So, in turn, Jesus gave us the gift of the Church; this gift guides us and leads us through our lives, just like a script leads an actor or actress through a performance.

There are so many beautiful "tools" that the Church gives us. These tools are ones that give us the freedom to truly love the Lord and to recognize the path we must follow to live a life for Him. We have the sacraments, perhaps one of the greatest tools that allows us to live our faith and experience the full presence of Christ. We have Sacred Scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and models of prayer, such as *lectio divina*, Liturgy of the Hours, and the Ignatian Examen. These are meant to be the guide for our lives. These tools are instituted by Christ, rooted in Sacred Scripture and tradition, and are necessary for us, as people of faith and members of the Church, to truly live in the freedom of Christ every day!

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. What is your reaction to the argument "I am spiritual but not religious"? Have you ever encountered anyone who has said this?
2. Are there any teachings of the Church you struggle with? Where is the best place to find the answers to some of your questions?
3. What is one "tool" that the Church gives us that you would like to spend more time using?

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LIFE NIGHT: HOLY OR HYPOCRITE

CONTENT OVERVIEW

There are many roles that we play in life and each one comes with a different set of expectations. How we are seen performing and living up to those expectations often leads one to make different conclusions. For example, if a parent is seen spending time with their kids, playing with them, and teaching them, they may be labeled as a “good parent.” If someone is an athlete and they are seen scoring a lot of points for their team, making good defensive plays, or simply contributing to the overall success of the team, they also may be labeled as a “good athlete.” But, the reverse is true as well. A parent, in a moment of frustration, may lash out and yell at an unruly child. Onlookers may label that person then as a “bad parent,” due not only to their misbehaving kid but because they publically yelled at their child. A kicker may be labelled as a “bad athlete” if he misses a short, game-winning field goal, during the football game. The problem at hand, then, becomes that the person is judged, not by the many times they may have been a good parent or made a good play, but for that one moment in which they did not live up to the expectation of their role.

The same is true with our faith. Think about the expectations of a Catholic or a Christian. Sometimes, people who are Catholic live it well. When they don't, however, they are labeled as a hypocrite. Hypocrisy can be a very serious issue. People make judgements about the Church, and about faith in general, from the mistakes or shortcomings that are made and seen.

American author Brennan Manning once said, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians, who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

It's important to recognize that it is because of our imperfection that the Church exists. The Church remains perfect even though we, as her children, all have moments of hypocrisy and fall short of perfection. The Church invites us with love and compassion to receive divine grace which aids us in the process of holiness. People don't go to church to prove their holiness; they go to church to recognize their sinfulness and their desire to be made holy (Romans 3:23). This is why we pray the Penitential Act at the beginning of each Mass. This is why the Church offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These things do not highlight the hypocrisy of believers but rather point to a desire for holiness, to heal the wounds of our mistakes, and to move forward in grace and love.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Have you ever been judged on any of the “roles” that you play in life? How does it feel to be judged?
2. Have you ever been labelled a hypocrite? Why did someone give you this label?
3. How is hypocrisy a danger to our faith? How can we, as a family, battle hypocrisy in our world?

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LIFE NIGHT: TRUST OR FEAR

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Good trainers at the gym know how to push their clients during a workout. Whether it is a personal or group fitness trainer, they know the physical and mental limits of the people they are training. What makes them a good trainer is pushing these limits just enough. When this is done, the one who is working out can achieve the desired results (i.e., more muscle, weight loss, better cardio, etc.). These results, however, come from long hours of “pain” and “suffering” at the hand of the trainers. “Come on, three more reps... 15 more seconds... one more burpee!” Usually, after one of these long workouts, one experiences evident soreness. However, when results from the workouts are seen, the moments of “suffering” are understood and justified, even welcomed.

Taking this notion of suffering deeper, what do we do in our own lives when we experience suffering? We either directly or indirectly experience many types of suffering. Turn on the news at the end of the night and we are quickly exposed to many people who experience suffering in this world. On a more personal level, many currently experience pain and suffering from a sickness, a broken relationship, a death in the family, or any other physical or emotional pain. In these moments, we may be quick to question God’s love and goodness. Why does He allow suffering to exist?

What we must remember is that Christ suffers with us. Jesus not only experienced hours of pain and suffering on the cross, but He also experienced sadness and grief when His friend Lazarus died. He encountered anguish and anxiety while in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 11:35, Matthew 26:36-42). Time and time again, however, God has proven to us that He can make beauty out of ashes, meaning God can take any situation and work it for the good of those who love Him.

Think about when tragedy strikes any city or person. We experience many people who respond with love, kindness, generosity, and compassion. Death and tragedy do not prevail; God’s love overcomes any darkness and suffering that we experience in the world. God will never abandon us or turn His back on us. We will experience suffering in life. When we do, we can either live in the pain that it may cause or trust that the God of the universe is working for our good (Romans 8:28).

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. How do you answer the question, “How does a loving God allow suffering in the world?”
2. What types of suffering have we experienced this past year as a family? What can we do now to help one another through our suffering?
3. Is there anyone in our life right now who is also experiencing any type of suffering? How can we, as a family, reach out to that person?